ART MONTHLY



Necessary Distraction

Painting

Show

AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI O TAMAKI

28 Nov 2015 —— 28 Mar 2016 Free Entry



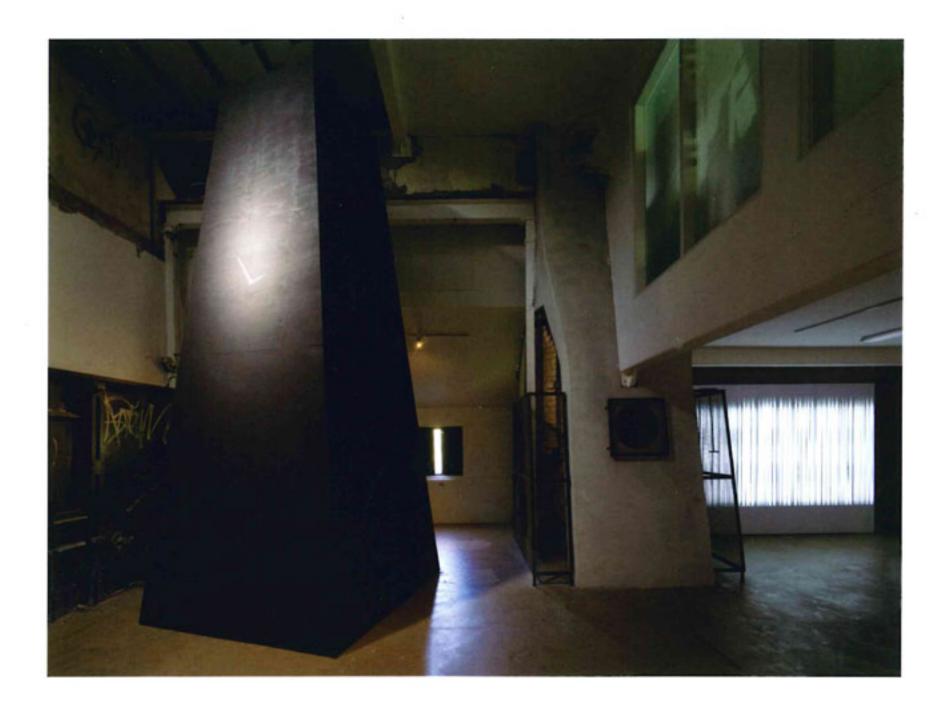
CONTEMPORAR



Stella Corkery Smoke and Butterfly 2015

Slow burn

Robyn Backen's 'If you do not speak, do I speak for you?'



John Murphy, Sydney

Top:

Robyn Backen, If you do not speak, do I speak for you?, 2015, installation view, Incinerator Art Space, Sydney, 2015; photo: Ian Hobbs

Opposite

Walter Burley Griffin, drawing of the planned incinerator for Willoughby, New South Wales, c. 1930–37, from the Eric Milton Nicholls collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra: nla.pic-vn3944572 On a wet weekday afternoon in September 1934, the Mayor of Willoughby opened the Council's new incinerator before 60 guests. Although the incinerator replaced an open tip at the portentously named Flat Rock Gully, its approval had been disputed. The contract was awarded to the Reverberatory Incinerator and Engineering Company (RIECo), which collaborated with the architect Walter Burley Griffin and his associate Eric Nicholls in constructing 12 incinerators, six of which have survived as architectural monuments with renewed functions. As RIECo's title denotes, one of its innovations was to reverberate the incinerator's functions: its heat was reflected for other purposes, including the sterilisation of sanitary pans.

Reverberation is also a capable term for the history of the Willoughby Incinerator. The opposition to its construction resurfaced in the mid-1970s in a wish to demolish it; the past disposal of refuse was counterpoised when the building became a restaurant, its ovens appearing 1980s palates.

The incinerator itself was consumed by fire before it was reinvented finally as a Council art space. In September this year it was one of the hosts of the inaugural Willoughby Visual Arts Biennial. Its theme, 'Imagining Place', was an especially fertile one for the building, and the sculptor and installation artist Robyn Backen was invited to react to the site, working with curator Venita Poblocki and mentoring local artist Sarah Fitzgerald.

The Willoughby Incinerator steps down the side of an embankment in a series of skillions; like the digestive system, it was fed at the top floor, and

the garbage fell through chutes until incineration was completed and its residue was discharged as ash, re-used partly for road base. Backen's installation took place in the building's lowest floor, where incineration occurred before the residue was released into a quenching chamber. The installation began with quotations from the American physicist Richard Feynman, who described the phenomenon of fire in a way that combined theoretical sophistication with animistic undertones. Atoms of oxygen 'would prefer to be closer' to those of carbon in wood, and with sufficient stimulation the atoms 'bump against each other', they 'jiggle faster and faster' and 'snap together'. The result of this feverish exchange is fire. The quotations from Feynman moved across an introductory screen until the text itself became atomised, breaking apart before reforming into words.

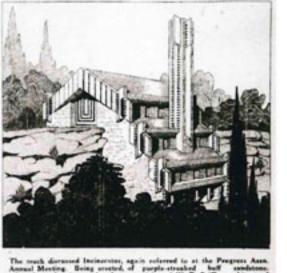
Backen's selection of quotations suggested her interest in fire as a form of motion; the components of her installation were volatile – they jiggled and reverberated with each other and the building. Private thoughts and public forces were also intertwined. For some visitors, her quotations from Feynman may have 'snapped together' with the analysis of Griffin's incinerators made by his wife and fellow architect Marion Mahony Griffin. Feynman contributed to the Manhattan Project's development of the atomic bomb, and after the Second World War Marion Griffin identified the Pyrmont Incinerator as a unique record of twentieth-century civilisation, one that had been emphasised by the 'smashing of the atom'. In strange exalted terms she specified the metaphysical qualities of the incinerator's ornament, 'the record of what remains when matter is destroyed'.²

Poised within the room was a slender tower, constructed by Backen as a type of furnace. We were permitted to enter and borrow its privacy, but the enclosure was permeable, like the womb, to disembodied voices, and the question 'If you do not speak, do I speak for you?' was heard. Voiced by different speakers, it was repeated as an incantation to bring forth a reaction. The internal walls of the chamber were alive to our presence and captured the sound of any movement or word.

The sounds were recorded or 'burnt', as Backen phrased it, so their residue was kept. The experience within this dark retort resembled the initial step made by alchemists, the blackening or *nigredo* stage that began purification by slow fire, associated psychologically with releasing the rotten matter of falseness.

On leaving the tower, we may have observed a silent film playing on a shelf of space above us. Within this context, the repetition of its screening recalled the behaviour of fire: it spluttered, asserted itself and disappeared before flaring again to life. The archival film promoted the secluded estate in

Sydney's Middle Harbour designed as a model suburb by the Griffins. Occupying an elevated position, the film's figures appeared like disporting spirits, empyrean in their removal from the room's machinery and untroubled by the routines of refuse and its disposal. The excerpt recorded a dance performed on an apron of land, surrounded by the wooded foreshores of Middle Cove. Dressed in improvised Arabian costumes, the dancers evoked the fairytale exoticism of the ballet *Scheherazade*; at the same time, they bumped against our awareness of contemporary politics and jiggled towards another reaction.



Annual Meeting. Being evented, of purple-strucked hulf annotations, taken from the site, under the supervision of W. B. Griffin, architect, of Sydney, and Cartlevrag.

- 1. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1pIYI5JQLE, accessed 25 Septem-
- Quoted in D. L. Johnson, 'The Griffin Rieco incinerators', Architectural Association Quarterly, Autumn 1971, pp. 52–3.

Robyn Backen's 'If you do not speak, do I speak for you?' was exhibited at the Incinerator Art Space, Sydney, as part of the Willoughby Visual Arts Biennial 2015, 'Imagining Place', 5–26 September 2015.

CONTENTS

- 6 Editorial
- 8 Dispatches Gabriella Coslovich
- New Zealand at Venice: Simon Denny's 'Secret Power' Christina Barton, Venice
- 20 Re-animating encounter: Lisa Reihana's in Pursuit of Venus [infected] Vivienne Webb, Auckland
- 24 Reflecting a figure: The Govett-Brewster's new Len Lye Centre
 Wystan Curnow, New Plymouth
- The past is a foreign climate: Shigeyuki Kihara meets the Anthropocene Nina Seja, Auckland
- My big ugly art world: Grayson Perry on Aboriginal art and how to be undiplomatic in the history wars Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, *London*
- 42 Depicting durchblicke: The wall works of Klaus Moje Nola Anderson, Canberra
- 46 A desirous mind: Matthys Gerber at the MCA Max Delany, Sydney
- Multiple flows: 'Saltwater: A Theory of Thought Forms', the 14th Istanbul Biennial Julie Ewington, Istanbul
- 52 Through a glass darkly: 'Myth + Magic' at the NGA Diane Losche, Canberra
- 54 Slow burn: Robyn Backen's
 'If you do not speak, do I speak for you?'
 John Murphy, Sydney
- Continental drift: Derek Kreckler's 'Accident & Process' at PICA Marco Marcon, Perth
- 58 Robert MacPherson: Everyone, everything, everywhere Daniel Thomas, Brisbane
- 64 Peter Rushforth OA 1920 – 2015 John Freeland



CONTRIBUTORS

Nola Anderson is an independent arts curator and writer and Chair of the Board of the Canberra Glassworks; Christina Barton is Director of the Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi, Wellington; Gabriella Coslovich is a Melbourne arts journalist, former senior arts writer with The Age newspaper, and former editor of the National Gallery of Victoria's Gallery magazine; Wystan Curnow is a Trustee of the Len Lye Foundation; Max Delany is Senior Curator, Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Julie Ewington was, until recently, Curatorial Manager, Australian Art at the Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane; now based in Sydney, she is an independent writer, curator and broadcaster; John Freeland currently collects and writes on Australian and Japanese ceramics; Dr Diane Losche holds a Master of Philosophy and PhD in Anthropology from Columbia University and a Bachelor of Arts from Barnard College magna cum laude; Dr Marco Marcon is co-founder and Director at International Art Space (formerly known as IASKA); John Murphy is an independent curator based in Sydney; Nina Seja is a writer, curator and academic; she is the author of the photographic history book PhotoForum at 40: Counterculture, Clusters, and Debate in New Zealand (Rim Books, 2014); Daniel Thomas AM, a former artmuseum curator and director (at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, National Gallery of Australia and Art Gallery of South Australia) is now retired and living in Tasmania; Vivienne Webb is a freelance curator and writer; Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll is an editor of Third Text based in London and artist researcher at the University of Oxford; she is the author of Art in the Time of Colony (2014) with a PhD from Harvard University on Aboriginal art.



